

PORTAGE

# Founding Families

A Look Back at  
Early Settlers of Our City



*The Joseph Beckley Family*



# Michigan Public Land Sale

**Resources, cheap land and plentiful water attracted early settlers**



Segment of a United States map from 1718 by Guillaume De L'Isle, showing the Great Lakes region.

Molded by the melting of the mile-high glaciers, the Kalamazoo River Valley comprises one of Michigan's most significant drainage basins. The river originates in Hillsdale County and from the junction of its two main branches near Albion to its mouth on Lake Michigan it drops 352 feet while meandering 138 miles through Calhoun, Kalamazoo and Allegan Counties.



**Public land sales boomed.** The Act of April 24, 1820, authorized land to be sold for a minimum of \$1.25 per acre and tracts as small as 80 acres. Public lands initially offered for sale by District Land Offices were sold at pre-announced, scheduled public auction.

## From The Gazeteer, "Population and Immigration"

One of the greatest obstacles to emigration, even where the advantages of it are well ascertained is, the effort it costs in making the attempt.

As a means of obviating this difficult, at least in a great measure, resort should be had to the formation of colonies for immigration. Ten, thirty, or fifty families of a neighborhood, might agree upon the project, appoint a competent and trusty agent to select and locate a body of lands, suitable and sufficient for the company. The choice of each might then be determined by lot.

A farm of 80 acres of government land costs \$100—160 acres, or a quarter section, \$200—320 acres, or a half section, \$400—640 acres, or a section, \$800—a township of land, or 23,040 acres, \$28,800. Each individual may estimate the amount of land he wants, its cost, and the expense of emigrating. A father may sell his small farm in the East for a sum that will purchase a dozen large ones in the West, of the best quality of land. He may thus better his own condition, and settle a handsome property upon each of his family, who, in a few years, may become wealthy and independent, without the least difficulty.



Photo courtesy of Joshua G. Cohen, Michigan Natural Features Inventory

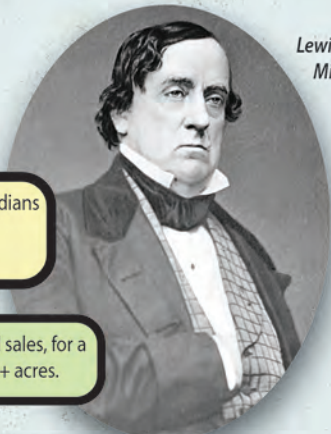
The area around Portage Creek was predominantly mixed conifer swamps (above) and oak barrens (below) neither ideal for farming; enterprising settlers used the waters of Portage Creek to run a sawmill and a grist mill.



Photo courtesy of Jesse M. Lincoln, Michigan Natural Features Inventory



# Migration To Portage



Lewis Cass, Governor of the Michigan Territory

"Old Mill on Portage Creek" (The Elijah Root Sawmill), oil painting by Ida M. Briggs. 1948  
courtesy of Stanley J. Briggs



**1817:** Governor Cass signs treaty with the Indians giving lands around Portage and Kalamazoo to the U.S. government.

**1820:** Act of April 24 authorizes land sales, for a minimum of \$1.25/acre for 80+ acres.

**1830:** William Bishop's Deed is registered. Mr. Herring settles in Portage.

**1833:** Thomas, Arad & Benjamin Cooley, Caleb Sweetland, Elijah Root, Joseph Eastland, and Martin Lathrop and 18 others register deeds

**1834:** Elijah Root Sawmill constructed; Thomas and Arad Cooley purchased and improved gristmill owned by Mr. Barber; first school was taught by Mr. Ramsdell at District #1 School in Indian Fields.

**1836:** John Howard appointed first Postmaster

**By 1836:** More land was sold in the Kalamazoo Land Office than anywhere else in the U.S.

**1837:** Michigan becomes a state.

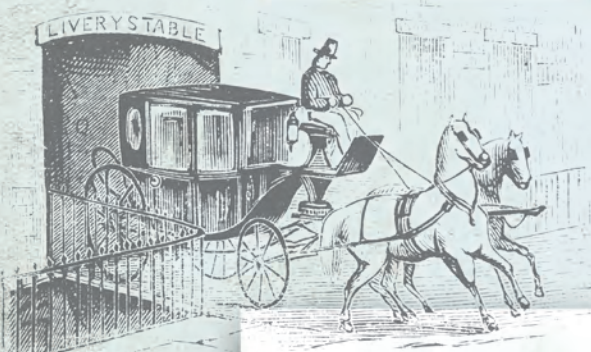
**1840:** First post office established at Carpenter's Corners.

**1838:** First community meeting at the home of Moses Austin, who suggested naming the new township after Portage Creek.

First township meeting held at the home of Elijah Root; Moses Austin elected chairman, Caleb Sweetland elected clerk. The meeting was then adjourned to Stone's Tavern, where Elijah Root was elected Supervisor.

**1850:** There were 120 families living in Portage Township, including seven carpenters, three blacksmiths, and a bricklayer building homes and farm structures.

**1852:** 1852: Portage Center Hotel (Lathrop's Hotel, a stagecoach stop and livery), built by Daniel Lathrop for travelers using the newly-completed plank road linking Kalamazoo and Schoolcraft.



Portage Center Hotel (aka Lathrop's Hotel)



# Settling & Development



It is interesting to note that a great many of the settlers in Portage Township came from Genesee and Canandaigua Counties in New York State. It seems that when word traveled back East about the beauty of the landscape, the productiveness of the soil and the cheapness of the land, several former friends. Some of them came to see the place for themselves; others instructed their friends to buy the land for them. Whatever they did, it was soon apparent that the barges on the Erie Canal, which had opened in 1825, carried a steady stream of traffic. On entering Buffalo the passengers transferred to the Lake Erie steamer to Detroit and after stocking up on food and other essentials started for Kalamazoo County. By this time the Territorial Road had been somewhat improved and there were numerous taverns, log cabins and frame homes of early settlers along the way.

## EARLIEST PORTAGE SETTLERS

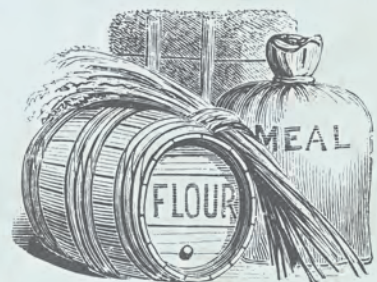
- |                            |                                   |                                  |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. John Kilgore            | 11. Joseph Eastland               | 21. Jonas Woodard                |
| 2. Allison Kinne           | 12. Daniel Cahill                 | 22. Francis Downey               |
| 3. Prudence Howard Wattles | 13. Ebenezer Stone (Stone Tavern) | 23. Eli Harrison                 |
| 4. Stephen Howard          | 14. Elijah Root                   | 24. Ebenezer Durkee              |
| 5. Caleb Sweetland         | 15. Ruel Starr                    | 25. Henry Tuttle                 |
| 6. John Howard             | 16. Job Meyers                    | 26. Martin Lathrop               |
| 7. Isaac Brooks            | 17. William Milham                | 27. David Ingersoll              |
| 8. Joseph Beckley          | 18. Thomas Blackmer               | 28. Alvin Bacon                  |
| 9. Arad Cooley             | 19. Otis Pitts                    | 29. Moses Austin (Austin Tavern) |
| 10. Thomas Cooley          | 20. Samuel Crooks                 | 30. William Bishop               |



Stephen Howard Homestead



By 1835 about two thirds of the northern half of Portage Township had been entered at the government land office. This land was rapidly being cleared by pioneers who planned to settle there, and most of it would be planted in corn, the staple crop. The grinding of corn by hand was of short duration. Thomas Cooley took over the gristmill on Portage Creek on the northwest corner of what is now Lover's Lane and Kilgore Road. He and his brother Arad operated this mill for several years. Besides running the mill they also farmed. It is said that the settlers in nearby farms were accustomed to carrying a sack of corn on their backs to the Cooley mill, having it ground and carrying it home again. Later the Cooleys acquired more land for farming, and Hiram Kilgore bought the gristmill.





# Early Government

## *The Beginnings of Portage Township*

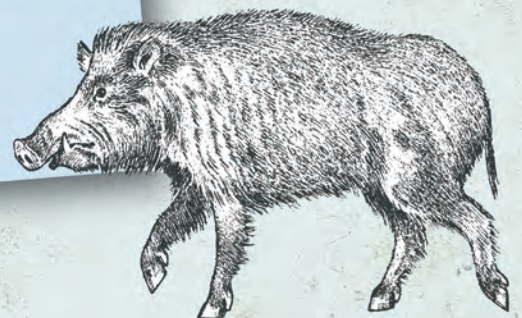
Portage was established as a Township on March 6, 1838. The first Township meeting was held at residence of Elijah Root on April 2, 1838; then everyone moved to Ebenezer Stone's Tavern (150 feet away), which was "more commodious" and had the added benefit of plenty of whiskey, to elect first slate of officers and conduct the first business for the new Township.

### FIRST PORTAGE TOWNSHIP OFFICIALS ELECTED IN 1838

Supervisor ..... Elijah Root  
Town Clerk ..... Caleb Sweetland  
Assessors ..... Martin Lathrop, James S. Chaffee, Rossiter Howard  
Collector ..... Chester Crooks  
Justices of the Peace ..... Ebenezer Stone, Caleb Sweetland  
Highway Commissioners ..... Thomas J. Chaffee, Stephen Howard, F. W. Dunham  
School Inspectors ..... Caleb Sweetland, Stephen Howard, T. W. Dunham  
Constables ..... Chester Crooks, Chauncey Root  
Overseers of Poor ..... Thomas J. Chaffee, Joseph Eastland  
Pathmasters ..... Allison Kinne, Lowell Goodrich, Elijah Root, Enoch French,  
Jonas Woodard, Moses Austin, Elias Stone

### FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS::

- Creation and fencing of a "burying ground"
- Setting fence heights in the Township at 4 ½ feet.
- Prohibiting the running loose of boars over 3 months old, however sows could free range.
- Bounty of \$5 for wolf scalps for each wolf "ketched and killed"





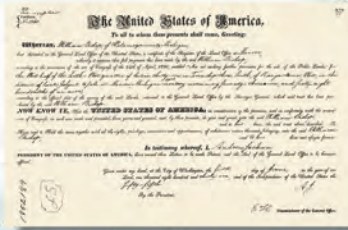
# Early Settlers

## WILLIAM BISHOP [m. Unknown]

[Birth - Death dates and locations unknown]

LAND DEED: 1831

HISTORY: First entry into the land books for what would become Portage Township and settled in the southwest corner of Portage.



Wm. Bishop Land Deed

## ARAD COOLEY [m. Charlotte Sweetland]

1790 - 1851, Indian Fields Cemetery

BORN: Massachusetts

LAND DEED: 1833

HISTORY: Built a gristmill on the site of Pierce Barber's original mill on Portage Creek (at Lovers Lane and Kilgore) with his brother Thomas

CHILDREN: Miles, Harvey, Manson, Charlotte; Son James Cooley came to Portage in 1865.

BROTHERS: Thomas and Benjamin

Wolves were very troublesome. Mr. Thomas Cooley went to a neighbors, (Ramsay's) about three miles distant, one afternoon; just at evening he started for home, with a quarter of venison which the boys had just brought in and dressed. He had not proceeded far when he saw several wolves coming after him. To escape them he cut off pieces of venison and threw down as they approached too near, and while they were quarreling over the meat he would make the best use he could of his legs. When he reached Mr. Allison Kinne's house the shoulder of venison had all been fed out to the savage beasts.

Thomas, James M. Kalamazoo County Directory: With a History of the County From Its Earliest Settlement ... Kalamazoo, Mich.: J. M. Thomas, 1869.



## STEPHEN HOWARD [m. Catherine Payne]

1808 - 1893, Dry Prairie Cemetery

BORN: New York

LAND DEED: 1836/1838

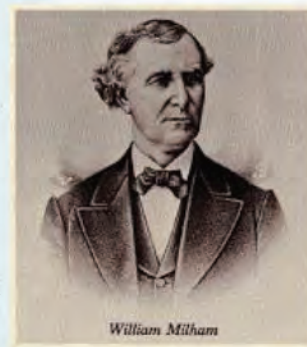
HISTORY: Home originally owned by Allison Kinne who sold the property to brother-in-law Stephen Howard in 1836.

CHILDREN: Harriet, Amanda, Cecelia, George



Stephen Howard home

Alice Howard, granddaughter of Stephen Howard, had many amusing incidents to tell about her early years on the farm. Apparently her great aunt, Belva Howard, lived with her Aunt Amanda. Great Aunt Prudy lived a short distance away and some of their time was spent visiting on the front porch of Grandpa Stephen's house. They all smoked pipes and one Fourth of July Aunt Belva was induced to ride in an ox cart in the parade dressed in pioneer costume and smoking her pipe. Another fond memory is of walking over the hill to her great aunt Lydia Kinne's farm and going wading with her cousins in their creek. She and Burson Gibbs, grandson of William Gibbs, both recall going to pick the huge blackberries that grew in Mandy's Woods. For years her Aunt Amanda owned a twenty acre woodlot and allowed all the children to pick blackberries when they were ripe.



William Milham

## WILLIAM MILHAM

[m. Anna, Marietta Root, Emma]

1824 - 1913, Indian Fields Cemetery

BORN: New York

LAND DEED: 1848, purchased land from Mr. Stone

HISTORY: Farmer, Stock-raiser of cattle and sheep

CHILDREN: Anna and Flora

FATHER: John Milham



# Early Settlers



William and Francis Kilgore. William was the son of pioneer John Kilgore and the grandfather of Portage resident, Herschel Kilgore.



## JOHN KILGORE

[m. Catherine Martin]

1809 -1874, Dry Prairie Cemetery

BORN: Ireland

LAND DEED: ≈1840

HISTORY: Early settler of Portage

CHILDREN: Martha, Hiram, William

## MARTIN LATHROP [m. Elizabeth Root]

Unknown-1853, Dry Prairie Cemetery

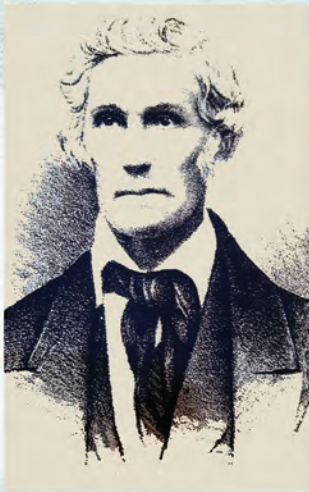
BORN: Unknown

LAND DEED: 1833

HISTORY: Portage Clerk, 1839; Treasurer, 1842-43; Supervisor, 1844

CHILDREN: Chauncey

Lathrop built a hotel with a large ballroom for dances on the top floor and this drew young people from all over the country. Hay rides in the summer and sleigh rides in the winter would end up at the hotel where an excellent meal was served. The evening often ended in square dancing. When Lathrop sold the hotel to his successor, Clinton Bacon, the good times continued. It was a sad day for Portage when in 1886 the old hotel burned down.



## ELIJAH ROOT [m. Milicent Stone]

1784-1861

BORN: Massachusetts

LAND DEED: 1833

HISTORY: Built the first sawmill in 1834; first Township Supervisor

CHILDREN: Polly, Betsey, Eliza, Charles, Sarah, Martha, Chauncey, Lucy, and Marietta

## EBENEZER STONE

Birth and death dates unknown; interment unknown

LAND DEED: 1833

HISTORY: Built the Stone Tavern, in Carpenters Corners, where the first Portage Township meeting was held. Elected as Justice of the Peace, 1838

CHILDREN: Unknown

## CALEB SWEETLAND [m. Alatheia]

Birthdate unknown -1887, Dry Prairie Cemetery

BORN: New York (Madison Co.)

LAND DEED: 1833

HISTORY: In 1831, Caleb Sweetland and the three Cooley brothers, Thomas, Arad and Benjamin, arrive from New York State on an exploring trip and decide to settle in Dry Prairie, west of what is now the Kalamazoo Municipal Airport. Elected Justice of the Peace, 1838; Town Clerk, 1838, Treasurer, 1839-41; Supervisor, 1839-43

CHILDREN: Three sons

## PRUDENCE WATTLES [Widowed, Nathaniel]

1800 -1891, Mountain Home Cemetery

BORN: Unknown

LAND DEED: 1839

HISTORY: Homesteader; son Stephen was a Civil War Colonel; husband Nathaniel died of cholera in Buffalo, NY in 1834.

CHILDREN: Myrtle, Stephen H., George W.

FATHER: John E. Howard.



Stephen Wattles, son of Prudence Howard Wattles, in his Kalamazoo Police Chief uniform.



# Early Settlers



**MOSES AUSTIN** [m. Sarah]

1784-1859

BORN: New York (Genesee Co.)

LAND DEED: 1834

**HISTORY:** In the 1830s, Moses Austin, sheriff of Genesee County in New York, was convinced by his former neighbor, Ruel Starr to follow him to Kalamazoo. Named Austin Lake and built popular dance hall and tavern where the first Township meeting was held in which he was elected one of seven Pathmasters.

CHILDREN: William and Benjamin



Sarah Austin

In the meantime, Moses Austin elected to settle on the northwest side of what is now known as Austin Lake. He arrived in 1833 with his hired man and younger son, Benjamin, in a wagon pulled by a team of four oxen. In a history of Kalamazoo County, published in 1880, the following description of their trip appears: "The trip of the party from New York had been an exciting one, especially for the youth. They made their way through the 'Cattaraugus Swamp', and at Dunkirk embarked on the steamer 'Sheldon Thompson,' - the first junior member of the trio had ever boarded. In due time they reached Detroit, and then the real difficulties of the journey began. They had brought along a team of their own, and started with it towards the setting sun; and, indeed, it seemed the sun would set upon their career as emigrants, and leave them fast in the mud of Eastern Michigan.

Clarissa and Joseph Beckley.

Children of Joseph and Clarissa Sweetland Beckley. Standing: Emily Beckley Smith, Mary Beckley Cross, Joseph Beckley, Charlie Beckley, Jonas Beckley, Richard, Sarah, Lucius Beckley, Maria Beckley, Fannie Beckley Pike.



## JOSEPH BECKLEY

[m. Clarissa Sweetland]

1813-1892, Dry Prairie Cemetery

BORN: New York

LAND DEED: 1836

**HISTORY:** Arrived with first-born daughter, settled on a farm next to the Howard Family.

CHILDREN: Fannie, Marcia, Lucius, Mary, Charles, Jennie, Joseph.

BROTHER-IN-LAW: Arad Cooley



The Beckley Homestead

## ALVIN BACON

[m. Julia Thompson]

1803 -1867, Dry Prairie Cemetery

BORN: New York (Ontario Co.)

LAND DEED: 1838, purchased large tract of land from a speculator

CHILDREN: George, Anna, 2 more

## ALLISON KINNE [m. Lydia]

1803-1873, Dry Prairie Cemetery

BORN: Pennsylvania

LAND DEED: 1838

**HISTORY:** Sold property in 1836 to brother-in-law Stephen Howard; Elected Pathmaster 1838, Supervisor 1854

CHILDREN: Henry



## DANIEL CAHILL

[m. Cornelia Hascall, Sarah Root]

1812 -1888, Dry Prairie Cemetery

BORN: Pennsylvania

LAND DEED: 1839

**HISTORY:** Farmer, Clerk from 1840-1846, Township Supervisor from 1847-1848

CHILDREN: Nancy, Leroy, Caroline



